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ABSTRACT

This report describes the experiences of a historian doing postdoctoral research at the Harvard Graduate School of Education in order to undertake a comprehensive history of American college students during the Great Depression. The problems in adjusting to new research methodologies are discussed, as well as the advantages of having been at Harvard, and the supply of research materials available at Harvard and other institutions. (AF)

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FINAL REPORT

REPORT ON POSTDOCTORAL FELLOWSHIP YEAR 1969-1970

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REPORT ON POSTDOCTORAL FELLOWSHIP YEAR

Although presuppositions and methods inhere in every intellectual discipline, historians traditionally act as if they have none to contend with. Accordingly, when an historian undertakes deliberately to train himself in another discipline, he proceeds as though his mind were a tabula rasa. Before long, of course, his implicit assumptions and techniques are brought out in a clash with those accompanying the new discipline. What began as a seemingly simple process of appropriating some new ideas and skills becomes a see-saw battle of contending loyalties--between the approaches he absorbed in his historical training and those involved in the new discipline. For a while the outcome appears unpromising. The new methodology so threatens the very substance of the study which it was originally intended to illuminate that the historian is tempted to retreat into his older ways. With luck and application, however, he can perhaps reach a happier resolution.

My year of postdoctoral research training at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, then, has proved more complex than anticipated. My initial premise, I think, remains sound: That, before undertaking a comprehensive history of American college students during the Great Depression, I should as an historian devote full time to studying the educational research concepts and techniques relevant to such a project. The implementation of that proposal, for reasons suggested above, proved difficult. In a sense, this year has somewhat resembled a sauna, consisting of alternating periods spent sweating through the hot house of new strategies and methodologies and then immersing myself in the cold but familiar waters of traditional history. The results, appropriately, have been mixed. While the experience has been exhilarating, it has left me somehow uncomfortable in both environments and unable fully to reconcile them. Further effort may bring me closer to that goal.

Rather than pursue this subject further, let me summarize my year's training activities. For, whatever my original reasons for choosing Harvard, I profitted from the very combination of old and new approaches which could be found in abundance in Cambridge. Not only the wealth of talent here--but the breadth of many of the minds in residence--added to the richness of my experience. Some of the scholars from whom I learned most had not figured in my original plans, but were recommended to me by others who knew of our complementary interests.

Perhaps my accumulation of new methods can best be described in terms of several encounters with faculty members who contributed to my growth. For example, in Professor Gerald S. Lesser's course in educational research, I was exposed to a systematic exposition

of empirical processes unlike any encountered in my historical training. Furthermore, Professor Lesser's mastery of the literature of educational research provided an invaluable guide to my further reading. More pertinent to a project such as mine, which would involve the making of inferences about student populations numbering in the hundreds of thousands, was Professor Richard J. Light's course in educational statistics. From him I learned the stratified sampling techniques from which my basic research strategy developed. For the past few years, Professors David Riesman and Christopher Jencks have been asking questions of contemporary higher education which bear on my project. Their search for analagous models for the college and university structure, to cite only one example, has stimulated me to explore the uses of comparative techniques in my own work. I was fortunate, furthermore, to contact Seymour Martin Lipset, Professor of Government and Social Relations, who was on leave. In his recent work on student politics, he has raised questions and accumulated data on polling student attitudes which expanded my horizons and suggested another profitable approach. This summer, in his broad-ranging course, Visiting Professor Edgar Z. Friedenberg has stimulated me to relate college students to youth as a social category. If I was fortunate to be exposed to such scholars, I only regret that Professor Erik Erikson was on leave.

Along with exploring new concepts and methods of research this year, I sought to familiarize myself with the history of American higher education. As I read the secondary literature on the subject, I discovered another area of conflict within myself. Beside a tendency to ignore the period since the First World War, most of the general surveys, institutional studies, biographies, and special monographs deal with undergraduates, if at all, in only a cursory fashion. Furthermore, the orientation of such works--to presidents and deans, to faculties and curricula, to classrooms and endowments, to the "prestige" schools--is hierarchical, formal, and institutional, while my interests are the opposite. I wish to study the lives of college students as much outside as inside the classroom, as much in inferior as in eminent colleges. The temptation to yield my own perspective in order to participate in the "dialogue" on the more traditional subjects was strong. But some of the historians with whom I talked helped me resist it, although most were candid in admitting that they knew little about my subject. (I concluded that they would not have put their own students to work on something like it.)

My advisor, Professor Robert L. Church, listened patiently and helped me refine or discard many of my ideas. Furthermore, his own attempts--in essays both published and unpublished--to place the history of education in a larger context contributed to my own thinking on the problem. Professor Marvin Lazerson, also of Harvard, was useful in this regard as well. Another advantage

of a Harvard base is the opportunity to meet visiting scholars in related fields. It was my good furtune to encounter Professors Lawrence Veysey of the University of California, Santa Cruz, and Hugh Hawkins of Amherst here. The former, particularly, was generous with his comments and suggestions on my project. Side trips in the Northeast afforded the opportunity to confer with Professors Walter P. Metzger of Columbia, Frederick Rudolph of Williams College, and Lawrence Stone of the Davis Center at Princeton. I had hoped to consult with other educational historians, but found them unresponsive. I was stimulated, however, by discussions with some of the younger scholars visiting the Warren Center for American history at Harvard.

With the aid of a generous travel allowance, I was able to attend two scholarly meetings in the Midwest--the Association of College Teachers of Education at Chicago in late February and the American Educational Research Association in Minneapolis during the first week in March. Unfortunately, I found the formal presentations at those conferences no more pertinent than the scholarly literature I had been reading.

As my research strategy began to crystallize, and my work in published materials reached its limits (though the catalogues of Teachers College and the Library of Congress revealed additional titles) the time came to investigate the archival holdings of typical collegiate institutions. Harvard, of course, represented only a fraction of the college population I sought to study; accordingly, I was anxious not to generalize in any way from the local situation. Consequently, en route to Chicago for the ACTE meeting, I paused in central Ohio to inventory the holdings at Denison and Ohio State universities. It was gratifying to find rich collections of material on student life during the 1930's at both institutions, and I returned to Cambridge with an impression of the research possibilities in my area which would soon prove overly optimistic. Two months later, on a similar visit to North Carolina Negro college campuses, I was confronted with a depressing paucity of materials; at best, for example, incomplete files of the student newspapers (usually published infrequently), and no records of student organizations. Fortunately, there are statistical means of compensating for such problems. Otherwise, the omission of Negro or Catholic or junior colleges from my sample would seriously handicap my study.

This summer, in attempting to bring together my various training activities, I have made one important concession to the more traditional historical approach to my subject. I have been reading memoir and biographical material on the prominent individuals who went to college during the Depression. I should like someday to compile an anthology of such writings to serve as a kind of tribute to old-fashioned history--before publishing a study in which such persons would perforce become lost in the college crowd. More

important, I am anxious to compare the college experience of this gifted elite with that of the larger mass of students during the 1930's.

It is difficult to conclude this report in more than tentative terms. While the course of my reading, study, and discussion this year has contributed to my development as a scholar, it has also presented me with problems which only further effort can resolve. Regardless, I am grateful to the U.S. Office of Education and to Harvard Graduate School of Education for affording me the opportunity to pursue this year of research training in preparation for my future historical work in American higher education.